

OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

FOR THE GOOD OF THE HOUSE

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By Michael White

MR. GARTENMEYER, general manager of the World Wide Store, sat in consultation with Mr. Maurice Schmerber, expert adviser to the firm. Mr. Gartenmeyer held in his hand a statement of accounts upon which his eye lingered with evident satisfaction.

"We can't make any kick on that showing," he remarked approvingly. "All the departments, except one, are running away ahead of last year's business. We've got to expect a set-back somewhere. I guess, still, for the class of goods and the capital invested it would be better if the cloak department was not acting as a brake on the wagon. How are those people, Marx and Blumenstein, doing in that line?"

Mr. Schmerber touched his carefully trimmed whiskers as his expression reflected concern. "A fine, high-priced business, Mr. Gartenmeyer," he returned. "We have overhauled and run away from them on every other line; but it's no use talking in the cloak department they beat us hands down."

The general manager removed the glasses from the bridge of his nose and polished them reflectively. "I don't quite see why that is so," he said. "I understand our advertisements draw customers to the show rooms, and they try on the garments, but for some reason they go away and empty their pocketbooks at Marx and Blumenstein's."

Mr. Schmerber coughed politely as he proceeded to explain.

"They have made a fine art of personality, sir, in their cloak department. They have Miss McFee as their leading show lady."

"Miss who?" interjected the general manager. "Miss McFee," repeated Mr. Schmerber, with a touch of admiration.

"Well, what's there about Miss McFee that she can hypnotize our customers?"

"It's in her personality, Mr. Gartenmeyer: the impression she creates on a customer. When Miss McFee throws a \$500 wrap over her shoulders and walks across the show room it is as if she were about to step up on a throne. Miss McFee has such a regal air that it makes a customer think that she would look the same in the garment being exhibited. Besides, when Miss McFee quotes an out of sight price in her 'take or leave it' manner, no self-respecting customer likes to feel small by asking for anything cheaper. That is the secret of her ability to empty the pocketbook as a deposit, charging the balance up to the husband."

"Well, have you met the lady?" asked Mr. Gartenmeyer.

"As yet I have not had that honor."

"Then how do you know she's such a wonder?"

Mr. Schmerber leaned over and pointed with the finger adorned by a handsome cameo ring to an item in the statement of accounts.

"You see I have charged up \$1,500 to the Secret Service and Intelligence Bureau."

"Yes, I was going to ask about that. I remember you mentioning it, but have forgotten just what you were driving at."

"Well, sir," Mr. Schmerber explained, "we have secured the services of an agent in each of our competitor's stores, to report to us in confidence any new move that is on. For instance, Marx and Blumenstein cannot throw out even a line of toweling now without our being tipped off in advance. But the service comes high, because it's dangerous work. You see, if Mr. Marx were to discover one of his clerks reporting to us—"

"I guess he would kick him out on to the sidewalk," interposed the general manager.

Mr. Schmerber made a disparaging motion with his hand.

"It is quite likely that he would, Mr. Gartenmeyer. Mr. Marx is no gentleman. I understand he has threatened even me with personal violence if I am seen talking to any of his salesladies again."

Mr. Gartenmeyer chuckled as if something tickled his fancy.

"Well, after all, Schmerber," he said, "I don't know that I'd care to have you around in like circumstances. But since you think so much of Miss McFee, why can't we write and offer her more money than she is now getting?"

"There is no danger in that," replied Mr. Schmerber. "she might use the letter to boost her position with Marx and Blumenstein, and in that case it would give away just what we are after."

The general manager stroked his chin pensively.

"Maybe you're right," he agreed. "Then how do you propose to win her over? I would like to see more doing in our cloak department. Since she is the only McFee, why, we've got to have her."

"Just so," echoed Mr. Schmerber with decision. "We must secure Miss McFee, but before making any direct move it might be better to find out through our Intelligence Bureau how she is fixed—what her salary is and so forth."

"All right, do what you like, so long as you stir up things in the cloak department. I hate to see those fellows, Marx and Blumenstein, beating us this way."

In two days Mr. Schmerber was able to report to the general manager. Usually his expression was cheerfully optimistic, but on this occasion it was toned down by the gravity of the situation in the cloak department.

"Well, Schmerber," greeted the general manager, "how's the only Miss McFee? Have you got her—cut her out from Marx and Blumenstein?"

"Miss McFee," returned Mr. Schmerber seriously, "is drawing a salary merely nominal compared to her talent—her demonstrative ability—but it seems old Marx has filled her so full of yarns about the skintight way that we treat our employees that she laughed at the suggestion made by our agent in their house that she might improve her position by crossing the street."

The general manager struck the desk a blow with his fist.

"Schmerber," he cried, "that is a diabolical outrage."

"It's merely characteristic of Marx and Blumenstein's business methods," remarked Mr. Schmerber, with emphasis.

"Sure!" exclaimed the general manager. "But how in thunder, then, are we to separate them from your Miss McFee, or Miss McFee from them, whatever it is?"

Mr. Schmerber leaned forward with both hands on the manager's desk, and spoke as one who had made up his mind not to be beaten regardless of personal sacrifice.

"For the good of the house, Mr. Gartenmeyer, for the reputation of our cloak department, if Miss McFee cannot be engaged with us, she must—she shall be, separated from Marx and Blumenstein. Then their cloak department will go to pieces."

"That's all right," argued the general manager, "to say that and shall, but how are you going to do it—that's the knot, Schmerber."

Mr. Schmerber spoke in a lower tone.

"It has happened, Mr. Gartenmeyer, that an employee leaving the house at the close of business has not returned the next morning."

Mr. Gartenmeyer stared at his executive officer

with an expression of surprise, giving place to an expression of alarm. In Mr. Schmerber's manner he thought he detected a vein of unlawful purpose.

"What the mischief do you mean, Schmerber?"

"What I said, sir, that employees have been known not to return to business."

The manager swept the polished surface of his head with the palm of his hand.

"Now look here, Schmerber, it may be I don't quite catch what's in your mind, but I want you to know this house won't stand for anything in the way of kidnapping. I will admit you have talent, but when it comes to schemes of that kind, I say we won't take any hand in them. There are limits to business enterprises beyond which we are not prepared to go, and kidnapping is on the other side of the line."

Mr. Schmerber adopted an apologetic manner touched with mystery.

"I did not purpose to kidnap Miss McFee, sir. What I intended to convey was that there are firms of rendering a valuable employee of a certain firm

away, Schmerber," he waved, "and enjoy yourself. Drink spring water, take hot baths, anything; but don't mention Miss McFee's name. I don't want to hear it again."

"Very well; just as you say, of course, Mr. Gartenmeyer," returned Schmerber. "We won't refer to the matter again at present."

Thereupon Mr. Schmerber's coatails swung with reluctant yet forceful grace out of the office.

If Mr. Schmerber's destination was a sanitarium, the selection of his wardrobe was unnecessarily fashionable and extensive. From the gent's furnishing department he selected a striking bathing suit, cravats of the latest shade and pattern, with negligee linen in designs appropriate to a holiday atmosphere. It was certain that wherever he was bound he intended to create a marked impression. As he was ordering his purchases charged up, a message was handed to him stamped W. W. S. Intelligence Bureau. He opened the envelope with his usual methodical precision to read as follows:



It became clear that Mr. Schmerber had risen to the foremost position in Miss McFee's estimation.

temporarily or permanently incapable of harm to other interests."

"What!" cried the manager aghast, as he conjured up a vision of the enterprising Schmerber deliberately running down Miss McFee with an automobile, or by some other means, equally culpable, rendering her of no further benefit to Marx and Blumenstein in the interest of the World Wide Store cloak department. "What! You'll be landing us all in the penitentiary. I won't stand for it, Schmerber. No, sir, don't you get up any more such schemes. Understand, this is a reputable house. Leave Miss McFee where she is. Let Marx and Blumenstein keep her. We must get along as best we can."

"I did not intend any personal injury to Miss McFee," explained Schmerber.

"I hope not," returned the manager.

"But there are no legitimate lengths, sir, to which I am not prepared to exert my efforts for the good of the house. Daring and strategy are necessary in modern business."

"That's all right, but I'm not sure our ideas agree on just what's legitimate. Now, don't you worry about the cloak department, or Miss McFee's name. You'd better take a vacation, Schmerber. Your nerves, I guess, require restringing."

"I was going to ask for two weeks if convenient," replied Schmerber.

"That's right. You go away to a sanitarium and rest up; but see you don't come back with any more of those kidnapping ideas, because we can't use 'em. Leave Miss McFee."

"Fee."

"McFee alone. Great Scott alive, man! What can you have been thinking about? Why, if our women customers heard we had got tangled up in such outrage!"

Mr. Gartenmeyer swung so far back in his chair that there was momentary peril of its overturning.

"We'd have to go right out of business," he added, recovering his balance with an effort. "Go

"Left Vac. Palatio, Ocean Park."

Mr. Schmerber carefully refolded the message and placed it in his pocketbook. He next visited the Intelligence Bureau and gave instructions that should anything of vital importance occur requiring his attention, to communicate with him at the Palatio, Ocean Park. Then he went home to prepare for his trip.

Ten minutes before the Ocean Park Express was timed to leave the next morning, Mr. Schmerber stepped into the station looking like a prosperous stock broker going down to his country house, but if clearly upon vacation bent, something in his manner as he purchased a ticket for Ocean Park implied that he was moved by a business undercurrent. It was as if beneath his holiday exterior he concealed a serious project in setting his face resolutely toward Ocean Park.

At five o'clock the train reached its destination, and twenty minutes later Mr. Schmerber had become one of the guests at The Palatio. In preparation for dinner he lingered over his toilet, putting finishing touch here and there and a bristle to his whiskers suggestive of some military connection. By design apparently, he was among the first on the scene of the evening repast, and from his place scrutinized with more than casual interest the entrance of the guests. It was evident he hoped to recognize among them someone whose residence at The Palatio possessed an attractive relationship to his own visit. Presently the head waiter bowed a trifle more deferentially as she entered. Upon her Mr. Schmerber's gaze became fixed. She swept to her seat nodding pleasantly right and left, yet with the air of one who might justly consider the floor honored by the tread of her feet. Such a figure, poise of head and carriage were not likely to be combined in any personality other than the star of Marx and Blumenstein's cloak department. It was unnecessary for him to ask concerning her identity. No wonder, he thought, they sell five wraps to our one, and beat us out of sight on prices.

"My! but she is a stunner," whispered Mr. Schmerber's neighbor. "She came yesterday and has set all the boys crazy. She's somebody all right."

Mr. Schmerber inclined his head in acknowledgment of his complete accord with the sentiment. Then he began to reflect upon the object of his presence at Ocean Park—how he was to separate Miss McFee from Marx and Blumenstein's, and if possible, secure her services for The World Wide Store. As he glanced toward her, hitherto unreckoned obstacles rose before him. In the first place she had evidently achieved an immense popularity from the moment she had crossed the piazza. Proof of this was manifest in the attentions lavished upon her during dinner, and the floral offerings she wore by right of spontaneous conquest. How was he to engage her attention where competition for her was even more strenuous than with Marx and Blumenstein? This feeling was confirmed upon him later in the evening, when his best efforts to interest her, following upon an introduction, were swept aside by the swarm of admirers constantly in attendance. Moreover he fancied there was an unusual shade of reserve, even coldness, in her initial attitude toward him.

"Mr. Schmerber—Mr. Maurice Schmerber! Oh, yes," she nodded distantly, in response to his courteous bow and opening diplomatic compliment. "Of course I have heard of you before, Mr. Schmerber."

Thereupon she strolled away upon the arm of a prominent young dentist.

Mr. Schmerber was somewhat puzzled but not discouraged. His caliber was proof against many setbacks. Since he had come to Ocean Park with the business object of gaining an intimacy with Miss McFee, he determined to achieve his purpose by obtaining a seat at her table. To that end, with the persuasion which seldom fails, he enlisted the good will of the head waiter. Thus at lunch the next day the head waiter managed a shuffle of the guests, from which Mr. Schmerber emerged as the *à-la-vis* of Miss McFee. But if he plumed himself at nearer contact could not fail to attract her favorable notice, dinner brought him the full knowledge of an illusion. Possibly he had displaced one more pleasing to Miss McFee, but in any case never before could he recollect expending his best attentions to such barren result. If he offered her the tabasco, she declined it emphatically; of the side dishes which he recommended she took no share. Whatever subject of conversation he introduced, whether it was a critical analysis of the table linen or the quality of the window curtains, Miss McFee's responses were terse to the point of rebuff. To be sure, her interest in those departments could not have been otherwise than cursory; but when he thought he had secured her attention in elbow-length gloves, she rose and begged to be excused.

For the first time in his successful business career Mr. Schmerber felt completely up against it. The situation was inexplicable, for if there was one man in the house who understood how to handle a dissatisfied woman customer, he, Schmerber, prided himself upon being that man—able to bow her to the door, happy in the possession of some article which ten minutes before she was absolutely certain she did not want. Yet here was the woman above all others that at the moment it was necessary for him to interest impervious to every humor with which he approached her. At carefully selected jests, which were received by the old lady on his right with laughter that threatened an attack of apoplexy, Miss McFee merely smiled faintly as she raised her eyebrows; when he told a thriller that made the rest of the table gasp, she for whose special benefit it was retailed stared without change of expression over his head. What her manner toward him signified he was at a loss to comprehend, and no opportunity was given him to discover. If he proposed a game of tennis she was already engaged to Dr. Brown, the young dentist; if a buggy ride, Mr. Thomas (in real estate) was beforehand with an offer of a sail on the ocean. For dances there always seemed to be a long waiting list in which to inscribe his name. Scheme, plan and try as best he might, he could not establish more than the most formal relations with Miss McFee; and the days slipped by without a chance to introduce the subject of Marx and Blumenstein's unappreciative estimate of her services, with the bid of The World Wide Store as a complement.

Into this baffling and humiliating situation there stole a complicating element. Subconsciously at first, but stimulated into full realization by the confidence of a fellow guest, Mr. Schmerber began to experience quite another feeling than mere business interest in Miss McFee.

"I don't mind telling you," said Dr. Brown the prominent young dentist, "because, you see, you never were in the running; but I wouldn't be at all surprised if I won out ahead of that chump, Thomas, with Belle McFee. And she is a belle—a ripper, don't you make any mistake about it."

The intense dislike which Mr. Schmerber suddenly conceived for the prominent young dentist was his awakening. Previously it might have suited his purpose for Brown or anyone else to remove Miss McFee from the scene of her triumphs at Marx and Blumenstein's, but the frank declaration that he was such an outsider as not to be considered seriously in the contest stirred him to action by the new incentive of deepest human interest. Backed by offerings of candy and flowers he redoubled his attentions, but though he was gratified to observe signs of fluctuation in the position of the dentist, his own remained, as it were, at arms length. Thus the period of his vacation drew to an end, with no progress made in the object which had brought him to, and that which had developed at, Ocean Park. The mystery of Miss McFee's attitude toward him remained unsolved, when the opportunity he urgently sought presented itself.

Dinner was about to be served one Friday evening when there came ominous reports of a revolution in the Palatio's kitchen. The reports took

visible form when the waiters retired from the dining-room and the greater part of the domestic staff were seen marching in a body to the railroad station. Whatever their grievances was, the domestic rebels had dealt a staggering blow to the Palatio's management, by abandoning that caravansary on the eve of a public holiday, followed by a day of rest. The management faced the situation with outward calm, reassuring their guests; but the likelihood of being deprived of a domestic staff until Monday was not comforting inwardly. Under the circumstances at breakfast, on Saturday, the guests rose superior to their appetites, but a picnic lunch of light weight and little variety would not down hungry protest. The worst of it was, as the Palatio was practically Ocean Park, there was no other gastronomic refuge. Miss McFee declared she was famished, and therein Mr. Schmerber saw his opportunity. He vowed she should not suffer the misfortune of a merely nominal dinner. He approached the management, and as the organizer of the World Wide Store Shoppers' Free Lunch to customers holding checks above \$1.50, offered to bring order out of domestic chaos. His offer was gladly accepted. Thereupon Mr. Schmerber displayed his executive ability. From among the guests he found cooks and started the fires in the kitchen; he drilled a corps of waiters; and if there were a slight element of revenge in assigning the real estate man and the prominent young dentist to the departments of vegetable peeling and dish-washing respectively, one cannot too severely reproach Mr. Schmerber. The result was that about four-thirty pleasant odors floated upwards to the windows of Miss McFee's apartment, and at six punctually Mr. Schmerber himself served her with the first course; in fact, he waited upon her with such discrimination in the matter of the best cuts that the old lady who had previously laughed at his jests was inclined to wax sarcastic. When Miss McFee arose from the table there was approval in her eyes and gratitude in her voice.

"Oh, Mr. Schmerber," she exclaimed enthusiastically, "whatever would have happened to us if you had not been here!"

As she turned to leave the room he judged he might follow without an invitation. On the piazza he suggested a short stroll to which she assented. A domestic crisis had at last brought them together. He was anxious to discover the cause of her apparent aversion to him, which, however, she saved him the difficulty of first mentioning.

"Mr. Schmerber," she said, after a few conventional preliminaries, "I feel I have been terribly mean to you; but I will never believe again what they say of you in the business."

"Who are they?" he asked with interest.

"Oh, can't you guess?"

"Marx and Blumenstein?"

Miss McFee nodded.

"And what do they say about me?" he requested.

As she did not reply he was obliged to repeat his question.

"But I don't like to tell you," she responded.

"It's not at all nice."

"But I shall regard it as a favor if you do," he persisted. "Of course you are not responsible for what old Marx says about me."

As they turned at the end of the board walk along the ocean front, she glanced toward him and then looked down.

"Well," she hesitated, "perhaps I ought to tell you since I have treated you so badly. Mr. Marx says you are just a holy terror to the employees at the World Wide Store, that you cut down salaries, and work everyone overtime."

Mr. Schmerber halted abruptly and stared with surprise at Miss McFee. Then he laughed outright, in which she presently lightly joined.

"That's a good joke," he exclaimed; "that's the best joke on me for urging our manager, Mr. Gartenmeyer, to adopt union hours and rates of pay. But surely you don't believe it?" he asked, seriously.

"Oh, not now," she responded with emphasis.

"Then it doesn't matter a cent," he added, drawing his arm through hers, and leading her down to the seashore.

After this it became clear that Mr. Schmerber had risen to the foremost position in Miss McFee's estimation. For him there began an excellent time, in which he combined the good of the house with supreme personal interest. If Dr. Brown suggested tennis, Miss McFee was already engaged to Mr. Schmerber; if Mr. Thomas proposed a fishing expedition, she intimated a preference for one who knew how to cook fish as well as catch them. At the evening hops everyone was on the waiting list, but Mr. Schmerber.

In this pleasing situation Mr. Schmerber was suddenly reminded of business by a telegram. He had overstayed his leave. What did it mean? Then followed another. Marx and Blumenstein were about to inaugurate a sale of fall wraps on a scale hitherto unprecedented. He must return at once to organize a counterstroke. By wire he asked for another day's leave on the plea of urgent business, and received it. What that business signified can be inferred from the coincidence that when his baggage was brought down next morning Miss McFee's was already in the express wagon.

When Mr. Schmerber entered the office he found the general manager nervously pacing the floor.

"Oh, here you are at last," he greeted. "What the mischief has happened?"

Mr. Schmerber smiled reassuringly.

"It's all right, Mr. Gartenmeyer," he said. "Miss McFee has sent in her resignation to Marx and Blumenstein's and accepted a permanent engagement with us."

"Aye!" ejaculated the general manager.

"Yes—I er—t— is—well, she has consented to become Mrs. —"

"What?" interrupted the general manager, beaming. "Schmerber, I congratulate you, both for yourself and the house. Shake, man, shake!"